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Magnificent Defeat
I Corinthians 1:18-31
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There is no such thing, really. "Magnificent Defeat" is a catchy combination: a good two-word sermon title. I happened on it as a book title a number of years ago in which it was used to describe what happened to Jacob when he wrestled all night with an angel at the Jabbok. The phrase has since remained in my mind as a synonym for what happened to Jesus Christ on the hill called Golgotha. But in the life we live, the world of hard realities in which we do our working and loving and suffering and dying there is no such thing as Magnificent Defeat. Rather, defeat is a defeat is a defeat. People may be magnificent in defeat, on rare occasion: Robert E. Lee, for instance: ~~or Gerald Ford after the last election~~. But beyond the symbolic gesture everyone knows that winning is the name of the game. There is nothing magnificent, per se, in being defeated.

That is true universally but it is particularly important in this culture. A ~~recent~~ New York Times feature article, "Losing can breed Winning" underlined the way the doctrine of winning has permeated American life, particularly in Athletics. "America is the most competive nation in the world...Of the 10,000 entries in the Guiness Book of World Records, thirty per cent are by Americans." National Football coaches are often regarded as the philosophers of winning. Thus, after the Washington Redskins lost the 1973 Super Bowl, coach George Allen got off a profound one-liner, "Losing is like death". And the late Vince Lombardi didn't say it quite that way, I am told, but who doesn't know the line, "Winning isn't everything. It's the only thing"? One of the better books I've read recently is Sports in America, by James Michener. Michener points out that losing is not accepted gracefully as the inevitable result for at least half of the participants in competitive athletics; it is simply intolerable. He cites ~~a rather impressive list of~~ several professional athletes who will not allow their children to engage in little league sports because of the emotional pressure placed on them by parents and other adults who cannot tolerate a loser. I know a little of that first hand. It is not uncommon for mothers to weep in the bleachers, and fathers to storm to the sideline to berate a little boy who strikes out - and then, for good measure, let the coach know what he, the father, thinks of his strategy.

We like a winner. The princes of the Protestant pulpit in the 19th century came right out and said it: good people will be blessed with success and wealth. It wasn't difficult to deduce, therefore, that success and wealth were the tangible evidences of God's particular pleasure and the individual's goodness. Today, the same deduction seems to pervade the market place. Nothing, it seems to me, is more innane than sitting in front of a television set, listening to a man who has excelled at quarterbacking a football team extol the virtues of a corn popper: a woman who is successful as a musician describing the superior qualities of a pick-up truck. Who in the world cares? Everyone, apparently, for it is the surest advertising methodology currently available. It works. We like a winner. We endow the successful with gifts of wisdom and character and intelligence far beyond the evidence. And when one of them has something to say about religion we buy the books faster than they can be published.

Christians have a problem in a culture that thinks like that, because by the world's criteria, Jesus of Nazareth was a failure, a loser. After thirty-three years, at the prime of his strength and vigor, when other people are receiving important promotions, big raises, buying new homes, taking giant strides in the direction of success and telling themselves all along that this is what life is really all about,

Jesus of Nazareth ended up on a cross. Scorned by those who mattered, regarded by His own people as a fraud and by the authorities as a traitor, abandoned by all His friends, Jesus of Nazareth was arrested, tried and summarily executed as a common criminal. You can't be any more of a loser than that.

I'm not sure that we do it intentionally, but the fact is that we disguise the crucifixion. The crosses with which we decorate our houses of worship are works of art: ornately inscribed, shining brightly, lovely to behold. But the cross on which Jesus was executed was just as ugly as the electric chair. It was reserved for those special enemies of the state for whom a quick death was too merciful, those who needed to be mocked and scorned and spat upon and watched as they died slowly. Sometimes it's difficult to remember what the cross really was. John Baillie, the Scotsman, caught that sentiment in a paragraph I have reproduced on the bulletin: "The Christian religion would have aroused much less opposition in the world if it had left out its emphasis on sorrow and suffering and death and spoken only of life and joy and peace; if it had offered Easter and Whitsunday without Lent and Good Friday. But a religion that deliberately chooses a gallows-tree for its coat of arms, what do men want with that?" (A Reasoned Faith, p.154).

That has been the issue since the First Century. St. Paul traveled to Athens once, the capital of Ancient Greece, the citadel of learning and philosophy. The memory of that visit must have been on his mind when he wrote the passage which is our text this morning. On Mars Hill the scholars gathered daily to discuss and debate. One would present an idea, the others would listen with respect and then discuss the idea. When St. Paul appeared on Mars Hill he was received graciously. When he spoke about monotheism, the oneness of truth and goodness the philosophers nodded in agreement. When he spoke about goodness and truth incarnate in a Palestinian Jew who ended up on a cross they laughed him out of town.

And so when he was writing a letter to the Christians in the Greek city of Corinth, not far from Athens, he came directly to the point: "Christ crucified is a stumbling block to Jews and folly to the Greeks."

The Jews had a special problem with the crucifixion. It is one of the cruelest twists of history that they, as a race, have borne the blame for it. Most scholars agree that anti-Semitism is in part the result of saddling all Jews with responsibility for what some did twenty centuries ago. Modern scholarship, in fact, suggests that if someone must be guilty the Gentile Romans bear the larger share of responsibility. But beyond that the Jews of the First Century responded to what was happening in their midst in a way I can understand.

They were, after all, prisoners in their own country. For century after century their land, given to them by God Himself, had been the doormat of the Near East: Assyria, Egypt, Babylon, Persia, Macedonia and now Rome: with inevitable regularity the great powers defeated, subjugated, terrorized, exploited their tiny nation, carried off their people and desecrated their holiest traditions. They knew what it meant to be losers. Their hope, their fondest patriotism, had roots in the only time that made much sense to them: the days of David and Solomon, the days of wealth and power when Israelite armies were supreme and when kings and queens brought gifts to Jerusalem. When they talked about the Day of the Lord, that was the image they had in mind. When they thought about a Messiah that is what they meant. One scholar observes: "Had Jesus at the height of His popularity but given the word, thousands of swords would have leaped from their scabbards and Rome might have been hard put

to contain the eruption of pent up religious idealism and fanatical nationalism of the Jews." (John Short, The Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 10, p.29). That is what they wanted: that is what they longed and prayed for. And when Jesus refused to be their king; when He turned His back on that noble dream their frustration and fury erupted - at Him. They were so very human. "Christ crucified" was an intolerable idea. And so they got rid of Him. They trumped up the charges and ventilated that frustration and cheered as He was crucified.

"Christ crucified" was a stumbling block for Jews and foolishness for the Greeks. We ought to be able to understand that too. They invented logic. They taught the world to reason and sculpture and build. Their highest goal was goodness: their noblest quest was for truth. They were openly sympathetic to the Hebraic concept of one God: that ultimate truth, ultimate good, ultimate beauty is One sounded like something Plato taught centuries before. But that this God - this philosophic abstraction - lived on earth as a carpenter; that He ended up a victim of crucifixion: that was absurd: logical nonsense.

"Christ crucified is a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Greeks." That was Paul's verdict and it still rings true. The mentality is alive and well among us. We want desperately for the Church to be successful, for instance, - by the world's standards. We measure the Church not on the amount of goodness done, service rendered, lives patched up and redeemed - but on the number of people on the roll and the size of the budget. Theologically we have a distinct preference for upbeat religion which accents the positive, and suggests that humanity needs a pat on the back more than salvation from sin. The limp liberalism of the early Twentieth Century preached the gospel of progress and taught that education was the answer to the human predicament. It took two World Wars, with the most civilized, educated and cultured people on earth bombing one another into oblivion to reveal the real foolishness of that and by contrast the honesty and magnificence of the Cross. John Baillie recalls the days in Germany in the 1930's, when government policy was to replace Christianity with a new religion that had no cross, no sadness or tragedy but only zest and joy and life. He recalls the bands of Hitler Jungen, conspicuously meeting outside churches on Sunday morning, laughing at the idea of redemptive suffering, waving their banner which read "strength through joy". (Op cite, p.155).

We don't want a religion that implies that what happened to Jesus of Nazareth has continued to happen in history. We're not attracted to a philosophy that begins with the premise that left to our own devices we have a rather consistent record of botching things up. We don't want a religion that suggests that we are anything but adequate on our own. We don't like to be called sinners: we suspect that ideas like forgiveness and turning the other cheek and voluntarily suffering for someone else are essentially weakness. And above all else we'd like it to be very logical. What we demand from our religion are answers: we assume that that is what religion is for - to provide answers to life's difficult questions. And then one day that assumption crumbles. Disaster strikes, tragedy hits close to home, or we meander into a mid-life crisis and wake up one day with the startling awareness that we're going to die and we shout into the face of God, "Why have you done this to me?" But it really isn't God's face at all. It's the emptiness of a philosophic abstraction which we've been carrying around in our breast pocket, or leaving at home on the coffee table like some unused family Bible. Out logical assumptions crumble because we've never really looked into the face of God, the face of one hanging on a cross, defeated, alone, dying.

What does that mean? "Where is the wisdom of this age?" Paul asked. It is significant that answers do not come easily and that even the theologians cannot agree. For 2,000 years Christians have tried to explain the Cross of Jesus Christ in various doctrines. You've heard them all. The "ransom idea" holds that humanity needed to be brought back by means of a very costly gift - the life of God's Son. The "substitutionary idea" holds that God in His holiness could not abide human sinfulness. Justice demanded punishment: Jesus got what we deserve. The "cosmic idea" maintains that good and evil met in collision on Calvary, and while evil won a temporary victory the battle was won by good on Easter morning. The "identification idea" suggests that the meaning of the Cross is bound up in God's complete identification with humanity - even in death.

Now let me be personal - confessional. Whether he wants to or not a preacher is driven to think deeply about the crucifixion of Jesus Christ at least once a year. There was a time when I regarded the preaching assignment well done if one of the doctrines of the atonement was held up, explained thoroughly and implanted logically in every Presbyterian mind: if people left church on the fifth Sunday of Lent saying to themselves, "Now I know what the Cross means." I don't believe that anymore. We need some logical handles to be sure. No one needs them any more than I do. God has given us minds with which to think - even about the death of Jesus Christ. But it occurs to me that to stand before the Cross and focus on doctrine, to present a tight theological argument with all the corners in place, to assume that we have confronted the crucifixion when we have an intellectual rationale which satisfies us for the moment, is to do precisely what Paul warned the Corinthians about.

Paul's own faith had been changed totally by the confrontation with Christ crucified. Not ordinarily at a loss for words, the most eloquent thing he ever said about it was this: "Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" (I Corinthians 1:20).

Think about that for a moment. Let it devastate your careful theology, and then pick up the broken fragments of our cozy, uplifting religion and walk the long road to the Cross. That's what St. Paul had in mind. He understood that it was as impossible to get in touch with the reality of God's love through the intellect alone, as it is to know the reality of a rose through the discipline of botany, or the glory of human love as a product of biology.

Thomas Merton wrote: "Sometimes, indeed, (a man) may have no philosophy at all. His faith may be so inarticulate as to seem absurd. Nevertheless he knows the peace of the one who has conquered everything. Why is this? Because Christianity is Christ living in us and Christ has conquered everything." (No Man Is An Island, p.76-77).

There are only a few occasions in a person's life that might be called turning points. One of them for me happened on a Good Friday. I was a first year Divinity School student. I wasn't sure what I was doing there, or if I wanted to remain. The present and future did not look very meaningful. I attended a Chapel Service on Good Friday: there was only a handful of us present. The preacher was a man who had become a dear friend: an Australian Congregationalist working on his Ph.D.: a thorough intellectual who was at home in the community of scholars: a man who